

Determinants of Malaysian adult learners' distance learning

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Abstract: This study attempts to identify the factors perceived to be important in choosing an Institution of Higher Learning (IHL) for distance learning. One thousand five hundred questionnaires were distributed to the first year students in the social sciences distance learning programs and 980 valid responses were received of Malaysian public university. The results show that the top three factors influencing their preferred institution are qualification recognition IHL, future career advancement, and personal satisfaction. The results of this study provide insights to the IHL, employers and academics on the nature and relative importance of the factors perceived important for adult learners in the selection of their preferred IHL.

Key words: distance learning; preference; adult learners; institution of higher learning; IHL

1. Introduction

Distance learning is the conduct of learning and teaching programs across both space and time by print or electronic media (Moore M., 1986). Distance learning is normally a highly individual activity that a student undertakes at home on his own at his spare time (Holmberg B., 1986). The mode of delivery of the learning and teaching materials is through communication media such as faxes, telephones and the internet. What may be apparent from the above description of distance learning is that the distance learners are mainly independent as the studying or learning is done at his own time and place independent of the teachers most of the time. Many researches on distance learning have shown that the learners are mainly adult (Moore M., 1986; Holmberg B., 1986; MacBrayne P., 1995; Wallace L., 1996; Qureshi E. & Morton L. L., 2002).

In Malaysia, the distance learning programs have started since 1971 when University Sains Malaysia offered its degree in humanities and social sciences through distance learning. University Technology Mara, previously known as Institute Technology Mara followed soon after by offering its diploma programs in banking, business studies and public administration. In 1995, the government directed all the public universities to offer distance learning programs with the objective of increasing the much needed manpower to propel it towards achieving fully developed nation status by the year 2020 (Ali A., 1997).

A body of literature has examined the factors perceived to be important for students in choosing their preferred IHL. Similarly, the education literature has focused on researching distance learning perspective. However, there is a limited literature on the linkages of adult learners of distance learning and the factors perceived to be important in choosing their preferred IHL. This gap motivates this study to examine this issue.

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The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief literature review of distance learning and its linkages to preference of IHL. The third section outlines the research method. Section four presents the results of this study. The last section concludes this study.

2. Literature review

The studies on students' preferred IHL contribute part of the extensive body of the accounting learning literature. Such attention to studying this issue was given by IHLs and academics in attempt to obtain further insights and understanding on ways to attract more students to enrol in their respective IHL. Within this literature, a number of studies have examined related issues such as the sources that the students relied on in making their decision of their preferred IHL, the factors that influenced the students to choose their preferred IHL and their preferred IHL after their enrolment. The studies examining these issues have often been conducted in a macro perspective such as internalisation in terms of bringing international students to their respective countries. Further, these studies were mainly conducted in developed countries context such as New Zealand (Joseph M. & Joseph B., 2000) and Australia (Illing D., 1998). Similar studies conducted in a developing country such as Malaysia is however, sparse.

A body of literature has identified the factors that influence students' selection of preferred IHL. These studies examined this issue using a wide range of variables, and suggested that good faculty (Baird L., 1967; Chapman D., 1981), high academic standards (Baird L., 1967; Discenza R., Ferguson J. & Wisner R., 1981), special programs that students are after (Baird L., 1967; Maguire J. & Lay R., 1981) and cost of study (Chapman D, 1981) are among the factors influencing students' preferred IHL. Other studies found financial aid, peer influence, size of the IHL, location, athletes' facilities and social activities to be influencing students' preferred IHL (Maguire J. & Lay R., 1981). Academic and program issues, cost of learning, location, recreation facilities and peer and families determine students' preferred IHL are also found to influence students' preferred IHL (Joseph M. & Joseph B., 2000). Another study found peer influence, financial assistance and location as the most important factors influencing students' selection of preferred IHL (Hossler D., 1985).

Lawley and Blight (1997) developed a model to examine the factors influencing students' preferred IHL. They suggested that the factors examined by previous studies influencing students to their preferred IHL examined could be categorised into four categories, namely course characteristics, country characteristics, administrative characteristics and cost characteristics. Course characteristics refer to the quality of the course, recognition of qualifications and time taken to complete a course. Country characteristics refer to the choice of location which includes the level of personal safety, lifestyle, the potential to emigrate, the opinions of family, friends and the presence of family and friends in a destination country (Hill C., Romm T. & Patterson P., 1992; Smart D. & Ang. G., 1992; Harris D. R. & Rhall T. M., 1997; Chandler A., 1989). Administration characteristics refer to the ease of gaining entry to IHL, information availability and ease of gaining exemptions (Hill C., Romm T. & Patterson P., 1992). The last characteristic is the cost characteristics which refer to the financial cost, availability of scholarship, distance from home and psychological cost (Hill C., Romm T. & Patterson P., 1992; Chandler A., 1989; Purdy K., 1992). A number of studies have adopted Lawley and Blight's model to examine the factors influencing students' selection of preferred IHL (Austin M., 1988; WU W. C., 1989; Steadmena G. T. & Dagwell R. H., 1990; Ghani E. K., Said J., Mohd Nasir N. & Hashim A., 2005).

The wide variety of variables examined in the studies above could be attributed to the research area focus.

Some studies were conducted at the international level (Burns J. O., 1979; Mintz S. M., 1980). Others studies focused on a specific country such as the US (Terpestra V., 1969) and Japan (Cummings W. K. & Kobayashi V. N., 1985). Few studies focused at different degree levels, such as Master's level (Nehrt L. C., 1987) and Doctorate's level (Kuhne R., 1990). Joseph M. and Joseph B. (2000) examined the factors influencing Indonesian students' preferred IHL in New Zealand context. However, there is an under-research of these variables in the context of distance learning students on their perceived importance of the factors in choosing their preferred IHL.

An alternative body of the accounting literature have research on the main sources of information that influence students' preferred IHL have been examined (Joseph M. & Joseph B., 2000; Murphy P., 1981; Hossler D., 1985; Ghani E. K., Said J., Mohd Nasir N. & Hashim A., 2005; Bowers T. & Pugh R., 1972; Krone F., Gilly M., Zeithaml V. & Lamb C., 1983). The results of these studies show that students' selection of preferred IHL comes mainly from the influence of significant persons such as family and friends, the characteristics of IHL such as the location and program availability (Joseph M. & Joseph B., 2000; Chin L. H., 2000; Garland M. R., 1994) and from the effort of IHL to communicate with the students (Chapman D., 1981). It would be interesting to research on whether similar results would appear with the adult learners.

The link between adult learners and the factors that influence their preferred has been examined (Ghani E. K., Said J., Mohd Nasir N. & Hashim A., 2005; Chin, L. H., 2000; Garland M. R., 1994). This small group of studies has examined the factors influencing adults' learners to do distance education. These studies provide few variables for the respondents to identify whether the variables are deemed to be important for their selection of IHL. The results of these studies show that the course is quick to complete, cost per subject is reasonable and the institution is a reasonable distance from home, which are the typical reasons given by many respondents in distance learning literature (Chin L. H., 2000; Garland M. R., 1994).

Following Lawley and Blight's (1997), this study attempts to re-examine this issue by identifying the factors perceived to be important by the adult learners' for the selection of IHL for distance learning. This issue is examined by using the Malaysian university public social sciences students who enrolled in the distance learning programs. This study also examines the perception of the adult learners on the IHL after their enrolment.

3. Methods

This study focuses on adult learners' preferred Institution of Higher Learning. Specifically, this study seeks to identify the factors influencing the adult learners to pursue their study through distance learning, the main sources of information in the selection of their preferred IHL, the factors that influence adult learners' preferred IHL and their perception on their preferred IHL after enrolment. This study examines these issues by the way of a questionnaire survey.

3.1 Sample

The first year students enrolled in social sciences courses are chosen as the sample in this study. The first year students are chosen due to recent enrolment into their respective courses, they could easily recall back the factors that lead them to choose their preferred IHL. Further, such sample would provide a high possibility that their perception would not be influenced by their experience in their chosen IHL.

One thousand five hundred questionnaires are distributed to the lecturers in charge of the first year university students. The lecturers distributed the questionnaires to the respondents during their contact hours. Out of the 1500 questionnaires, only 980 responses are usable, resulting in 65.0% response rate.

3.2 Questionnaire design

A questionnaire is designed and adapted from Lawley and Blight (1997) with appropriate modification to suit the objectives of this study. The questionnaire is divided into 4 sections. Section A involves requesting the respondents to provide information about their demographic profile such as age, family income, source of finance to support study and the working organisation.

Section B involves requesting the respondents to provide reasons as to why they chose to do distance learning. Section B also includes requesting the respondents to identify the main source of information that they relied on in their selection of preferred IHL. This section is an open-ended questionnaire to allow the respondents to freely express their opinion on the sources that influence them to their preferred IHL.

Section C requests the respondents on the factors perceived to be important in choosing their preferred IHL. There are 3 subsection in section C, namely course characteristics, administrative characteristics and cost characteristics. There are 12 variables related to the characteristics. The respondents are requested to provide their perception based on a 5-point scale of (1) being "extremely important" and (5) being "not important at all".

Finally, section D requests respondents' to provide their perceptions on their IHL after enrolment to their courses. There are 11 factors for identifying the factors perceived on the IHL. The respondents are asked to complete this section using a 5-point scale from (1) being "strongly agree" to (5) being "strongly disagree".

4. Results

This section presents the results of this study. The results are categorised into 5 categories, namely the respondents' profile, the factors influencing adult learners to continue learning through distance learning, the main sources of information in selecting preferred institution of higher learning, the factors influencing preferred institution for distance learning and perceptions of preferred IHL after enrolment.

4.1 Respondents' profile

Table 1 sets out the demographic attributes of the respondents. Panel A, Table 1 shows that most of the adult learners are above 20 years old (99.6%). Specifically, 29.1% of the respondents are between 20 to 25 years old and 33.4% of the respondents are between 26 to 30 years old. A small portion of the respondents are aged above 35 (15.4%). The results in panel A, Table 1 indicates that in general, the students doing distance learning are adults, which results are consistent with the previous findings (Moore M., 1986; MacBrayne P., 1995; Wallace L., 1996; Qureshi E. & Morton L. L., 2002).

Panel B, Table 1 presents the respondents' family income. A majority of the respondents (39.7%) have a family income between RM1, 001 to RM2, 000 per month. Another 30.1% indicates that their family income is between RM2,001 to RM3,500 per month followed by 12.4% between RM3,501 to RM5,000 per month. Only 5.9% of the respondents have a family income of more than RM5, 000 per month. Thus, it can be noted that people who has a family income below RM3, 500 are most likely to become adult learners. Perhaps the respondents opine that furthering their tertiary learning would allow them to get promoted and/or increase salary.

Panel C, Table 1 presents the respondents' job designation. The results show that 43.7% of the respondents are at the lower management post, 38.6% of the respondents are holding a middle management post and only 1.6% holds the upper management post.

Table 1 Profile of the respondents

Panel A: Age

Age	N	%
Less than 20	4	0.4
20-25	285	29.1
26-30	327	33.4
31-35	213	21.7
>35	151	15.4
Total	980	100

Panel B: Family income per month

Age	N	%
Less than RM1,000	117	11.9
RM1,001 – RM2,000	389	39.7
RM2,001 – RM3,500	294	30.1
RM3,501 – RM5,000	122	12.4
>RM5,000	58	5.9
Total	980	100

Panel C: Job designation

Age	N	%
Upper management	16	1.6
Middle management	378	38.6
Lower management	428	43.7
Others	145	14.8
Not working	13	1.3
Total	980	100

4.2 Factors influencing adult learners to continue learning through distance learning

This section presents the results of the respondents' response on the factors influencing their decision to pursue their learning through distance learning. The respondents were asked to list down the factors based on an open-ended questionnaire. The responses consequently were grouped into 3 categories that are self development, social responses and control over study time respectively. Each of the categories is discussed below.

4.2.1 Self development

One of the reasons given by most of the respondents in their decision for pursuing their learning through distance learning is self development. One group of the respondents opined that doing distance learning would enable them to do their present job more effectively. Another group of respondents opined that by pursuing their learning through distance learning would hopefully serve as a stepping stone for them to gain the academic qualification for entrance to pursue a higher-level course. Other respondents considered pursuing their learning would help them to gain promotion or salary increment in their present type of work, to enable them to apply for desired job or to improve their career prospects. Interestingly, there are a number of respondents who responded that they choose to do distance learning in order to gain more knowledge for community purpose. For example, one of the respondents needs the knowledge on accounting as she was appointed as the treasurer for the mosque committee in her area of residence. She decided to pursue accounting course through distance learning to gain

knowledge on the preparation of accounts.

It is not surprising that most of the respondents decided to study via distance learning as this medium would allow them to make up for the lack of learning opportunities in the past due to reasons such as lack of finance and poor motivation. Other respondents also opined that by doing learning through distance learning would enable them to acquire self-confidence by gaining higher qualification. One interesting response from one of the respondents is that he would like to find out if he could succeed at a course that is not within his previous area of study.

4.2.2 Social interactions

A group of respondents opined that by doing distance learning would enable them to socialize and mingle with other people of common interest. Another group of respondents viewed that doing distance learning could open more opportunities to find their future partner or spouse. The respondents could also make new friends of different areas and perspectives. Surprisingly, a few respondents mentioned that undergoing distance learning would give them some time away from their usual chores and surroundings at home.

4.2.3 Control over study time

Many respondents responded that they preferred to do distance learning as it allows them to study at their own pace. As most of the respondents were working, using this medium would provide a more conducive and less stressful environment. Further, the respondents opined that this medium would allow them to study without any restriction to their locations of workplace or home.

4.3 Main sources of information in selecting preferred institution of higher learning

This section presents the results of the research question in this study. Table 2 presents the results that the main sources of information in selecting preferred Institution of Higher Learning are electronic media/internet (47.8%), followed by family/friends/relatives (41.9%) and pamphlet/seminar/exhibition. The results indicate that newspaper is not a good source of information as only 0.2% of the students refer to this manner. This indicates that it would be advantageous to put more information on distance learning through the university website in order to attract more working adults to participate in distance learning. Of course, the grapevine (family/friends/relatives) is also important, but information disseminated in this manner is beyond the control of the university.

Table 2 Sources of information

Sources	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Family/friends/relatives	411	41.9
Electronic media/internet	468	47.8
Pamphlet/seminar/exhibition	99	10.1
Newspaper	2	0.2
Total	980	100

4.4 Factors influencing preferred institution for distance learning

This section presents the results on the factors influencing the respondents' preferred Institution for Distance Learning. The respondents were asked to rank the factors deemed important to them based on a 5-point scale of (1) being "extremely important" and (5) being "not at all important". Table 3 represents the summary of the important factors. The results show that the course characteristics is the most important factor as indicated by 91.2% of the respondents, followed by the administrative characteristics (88.6%) and cost characteristics (84.3%).

Table 3 Summary of important factors

Rank	Factors	Percentage (%)
1	Course characteristics	91.2
2	Administrative characteristics	88.6
3	Cost characteristics	84.3

Each of the factors above was further divided into few variables. The variables are shown in Table 4. Under the course characteristics, five variables are included: recognition of qualification, future career advancement, standard of course, time to complete course and company's requirement. As shown in Table 4, within this factor, the respondents have ranked recognition of qualification first in their selection of IHL (2.0425), followed closely by future career advancement (2.0435) and standard of course (2.2254).

The second factor, administrative characteristics includes three variables: standard of teaching facilities, ease of entry and availability. The results in panel B, Table 4 shows that within this factor, the respondents in the selection of the preferred IHL provide most weight on the standard of teaching facilities (2.2740). Ease of entry and availability of scholarship are not important determinants of the respondents in selecting their preferred IHL since their mean scores for these two variables are skewed towards "not important". The results show that the respondents provide a mean score for ease of entry and availability of scholarship of 2.6214 and 2.8286 respectively.

The third factor in the selection of preferred IHL is cost characteristics. Under this factor, four variables are identified: personal satisfaction, cost of study, family influence and distance from home. Within this factor, the results in panel C, Table 4 show that the respondents took into consideration of the personal satisfaction (2.1622), cost of study (2.3571) and the influence from their families (2.4384). Surprisingly, distance from home is not an important determinant for the respondents in selecting their preferred IHL for distance learning purpose.

Table 4 Factors influencing preferred IHL

Panel A: Course characteristics

Variable	Mean score	Rank	Overall ranking
Recognition of qualification	2.0425	1	1
Future career advancement	2.0435	2	2
Standard of course	2.2254	3	4
Time to complete course	2.5885	4	8
Company's requirement	2.7333	5	11

Panel B: Administrative characteristics

Variable	Mean score	Rank	Overall ranking
Standard of teaching facilities	2.2740	1	5
Ease of entry	2.6214	2	9
Availability of scholarship	2.8286	3	12

Panel C: Cost characteristics

Variable	Mean score	Rank	Overall ranking
Personal satisfaction	2.1622	1	3
Cost of study	2.3571	2	6
Family influence	2.4384	3	7
Distance from home	2.7171	4	10

Between the three factors: course characteristics, administrative characteristics and cost characteristics, the variables were compared and analysed. Taking into consideration of all the variables in the three factors, the first variable that the respondents look at in the selection of preferred IHL is recognition of qualification (2.0425), followed by future career advancement (2.0435) and personal satisfaction (2.1622) (refer to overall ranking in Table 4). The 3 least weight given by the respondents in their selection of preferred IHL is distance from home (2.7171), company's requirement (2.7333) and availability of scholarship (2.8286).

4.5 Perceptions of preferred IHL after enrolment

This section presents respondents' perceptions on their preferred IHL after enrolling to their respective courses. The respondents were requested to complete this section using a 5-point scale of (1) being "strongly agree" to (5) being "strongly disagree". Table 5 shows the results of the analysis.

Table 5 Respondents' perception of the institution and course

No.	Factors	Mean
1	The standard of the course is high	2.1639
2	It is a comparatively cheap place to study	2.5238
3	The course is quick to complete	2.9253
4	The institution is a reasonable distance from home	2.7093
5	My friends/families think it is a good place to study	2.2825
6	Teaching facilities are of a good standard	2.5225
7	I find the course interesting	2.1918
8	The course I am doing enhances my job performance	2.0455
9	I'm very certain and satisfied with my choice of institution	2.1036
10	I'm very certain and satisfied with my choice of course	2.1423
11	The cost per subject is reasonable	2.7623

From the Table 5, it can be seen that, from an overall point of view, the respondents agree that the course they have taken would enhance their job performance (2.0455). They are happy with their preferred IHL (2.1036) and course (2.1423) although they perceive that the standard of the course is high (2.1639). They also agree that the course is interesting (2.1918). On the other factors such as the course is quick to complete, cost per subject is reasonable and the institution is a reasonable distance from home, the respondents' response are closer to being neutral (mean > 2.600). These reasons are the typical reasons given by many respondents in distance learning literature (Chin, L.H., 2000; Garland, M.R., 1994).

5. Conclusion

This study seeks to identify the reasons to why the adult learners prefer to pursue their study through distance learning, their main sources of information in the selection of their preferred IHL, the factors that influence adult learners' preferred IHL and their perception on their preferred IHL after enrolment.

The results provide three main reasons as to why the adult learners prefer to study through distance learning. The first reason is for self development where the respondents perceive that would assist them in improving their working skill and as a way to obtain a higher qualification and promotion. The second reason is that the respondents opined that this is a way for them to socialize and mingle with the communities. The third reason is to enable them to study at their own pace without having to travel to their IHL. The results show that most of the respondents refer to the electronic media or internet and their family, friends and relatives in deciding their

preferred IHL.

With regards to the factors influencing adult learners' preferred IHL, the three main factors that the respondents would look into are the recognition of qualification (2.0425) followed by future career advancement (2.0435) and personal satisfaction (2.1622) (refer to overall ranking in Table 4). The results indicate that the respondents perceived that the qualification they received through distance learning is widely recognized and therefore, would enable them to advance in their career as well as fulfill their personal satisfaction needs.

As for the respondents' perception on the IHL and the course undertaken, the respondents were satisfied with their chosen institution and they thought that their chosen course enhances their job performance. The respondents also generally agreed that the course that they had enrolled in their preferred IHL was interesting although the course expectation is high. The results in Table 5 also indicate that the respondents were closer to being indifferent (neutral) about the time take to complete the course probably because it is known to them that they would have a longer period of time to complete the course compared to the full-time students. It could also be this characteristic of distance learning that makes this mode of study appealing to them as, practically, all the respondents are employed. They may also be neutral about the IHL is a reasonable distance from home, because, as mentioned in the earlier discussion, distance from home is not an important criterion for selecting distance learning as a mode of obtaining higher learning or academic qualification. However, the finding on cost per subject being reasonable is an enigma. The factor is expected to obtain a higher percentage of "agree" response since the majority of the respondents are self-sponsored.

The results of this study provide insights to the IHL, employers and academics on the nature and relative importance of the factors deemed important for the adult learners in the selection of their preferred IHL. The result of this study is useful in such a way that it highlights the effective means of communication of information to potential distance learners.

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